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Reverberations: Beat of the Heart

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

Working mainly from my own photographs, I paint friends in the local music scene. Their beauty, expressions, and unique personalities are the focus of my stylized portraits. I attempt to accurately record my subjects by using non-naturalistic colors in a small range of values. These images contain both abstract and figurative elements, and reveal a combination of far away and close-up views. Each painting is designed to capture a single fleeting moment. I provide precious glances into the lives of those people who help mold and nurture Washington, D.C.'s music community.

In addition to my paintings, I use the ancient symbol of the heart to complement my chain maille jewelry designs. I draw on the heart symbol to represent love and spirituality. My jewelry is centered on memories that bring me joy and inspiration. Through examination of these private moments, I reflect on my experiences. My works on canvas and in metal have given me the opportunity to deepen the understanding of myself. I believe my art stems from the people that I know best and the events that have shaped my life existence.

Reverberations: Beat of the Heart

Introduction

I have always been intrigued by the stellar collection of artwork located at the museums in Washington, D.C. Childhood visits provided me with images of ancient symbols and paintings of joyous scenes that deeply resonated with me. I especially remember attending the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* (1976) exhibit where I saw symbols embedded into objects from King Tut's tomb. These objects included masks, lamps, jars, and jewelry associated with the afterlife. Egyptian hieroglyphics seemed so magical and I was fascinated with this ancient culture that communicated by using symbols. I also spent a significant amount of time viewing the permanent collection at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Auguste Renoir's paintings, *A Girl with a Watering Can* (1876) and *Girl with a Hoop* (1885), caught my attention. Memories include pretending that I was the girl watering flowers and my sister was playing with a hoop. I bought postcards of these portraits and continued to look back at these images to embrace the cheerful scenes and memorable moments.

These initial experiences inspired my early art making and I continued to incorporate uplifting views and symbolism in my painting, photography, and jewelry. My interests led me to major in art in college. I earned my certificate to teach art and began my career. However, my creative work was continuously interrupted due to the intensity of teaching, and it seemed that I would not likely continue to make art. It wasn't until I enrolled in the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) that I was challenged to find time to pursue a personal and conceptual direction in my work. I also developed the appropriate technical and critical skills necessary for creating a

consistent body of artwork.

Through the MIS-IAR Program, I have channeled my energy into the focus areas of painting and metal jewelry. In my painting, I concentrated on stylized depictions of people in the music scene. In my jewelry, I focused on symbolism from Ancient Egypt that ponders the importance and meaning of life. Through painting and jewelry making I have learned to process my experiences. The MIS-IAR Program has allowed me to explore my individuality and to express my artistic voice.

Aesthetics

My work focuses on feelings of joyful and uplifting situations that are driven and reinforced by my own memories and experiences. Through examination of these moments, I focus on imagery that involves people in the music scene and the symbol of the heart. I design my artwork to elicit inspirational feelings from the viewer.

In my acrylic paintings, I highlight figures that express a wide range of playful, pleasing, and passionate feelings. These figures are local musicians, people associated with the music field, and audience members. I communicate their moods and actions through simple mannerisms and gestures. I want to document moments in their lives that illustrate universal human situations. I strive for my images to capture the cathartic and infectious energy present in a group of determined people who come together to perform and to experience music.

In composing a painting, I first take photographs that I simplify and enlarge with a computer program. I rely on a few contrasting tones of non-naturalistic, vivid colors to intensify and draw attention to the figure. I also incorporate various viewpoints to dramatically exaggerate and personalize each portrait. I implement hard edges to clearly define the high

contrast shapes that make up the images. By eliminating areas of detail, I want the viewer to observe and study the balance of minimized shapes, subtle abstractions, and apparent emotion.

As a complement to my painting, I design my jewelry pieces to reflect my personal feelings and private moments. Utilizing precious metal clay, sheet metal, and wire, I incorporate symbolism to tell a more personal story. The dominant symbol in my work is the ancient heart shape which is used to represent my life events. Hearts are a way for me to highlight my own personal journey that has made me who I am today. I want my jewelry to evoke similar emotions in the viewer and to invite them to take a closer look at some universal facets of being human.

Influences

Whether it's a child's scribble, Italian Renaissance painting, or graffiti paste-up, the unique appeal of portrait art influences my painting. For instance, the *Manifest Hope* (2009) exhibit in Washington, D.C. was a pivotal turning point in my artistic career. In this exhibition, contemporary American graphic designer and street artist, Shepard Fairey (b. 1970) unveiled his famous image of *Barack Obama* (2008). This figure came to symbolize the historic Presidential Inauguration of 2009. I was impressed with how Fairey's iconic image of Obama was able to reach millions of people because of its eye-catching, colorful, high contrast image that relied on the public's familiarity with advertising imagery. Fairey produced this portrait of Obama with flat shapes of reduced values, an expressive upward glance, and symbolic American colors of red, white, and blue. This simple, graphic presentation contains the features that I wanted in my work.

After seeing Fairey's images, I knew that I was most inspired by the artist that set the

foundation for this Pop-inspired portrait. It was Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and his approach to art making that I wanted to emulate. However, it was my interest in human emotion that led me to find figurative artists Alice Neel (1900-1984) and Elizabeth Peyton (b. 1965). It is their paintings that have inspired me to further examine the emotional content in my work.

Andy Warhol's Pop images of celebrities have always caught my attention. His technique of using non-naturalistic colors to create vibrant portraits is a prominent feature of his work. For example, in *Green Marilyn* (1962) he specifically chose pink, green, and yellow to emphasize Marilyn Monroe's feminine persona. From studying this work, I realized the power of using non-naturalistic color to draw attention to the expression and personality of the figure. This expressive approach to color became the basis for my images. In capturing the spirit of each individual I was constantly thinking about color combinations that would highlight my subject's individuality. For instance, in my paintings I might use warm yellows, oranges, and reds to express high energy in a subject. Communicating uplifting moods with vibrant colors and using reduced values are a tribute to and direct result of being influenced by Warhol.

Another portrait artist, Alice Neel, is known for capturing the essence of each depicted individual in her paintings. She did this by depicting their pose and glance that would best indicate their character. Neel enjoyed painting people she knew and she called herself a "collector of souls" (Hoban, 1). She spent a significant amount of time in New York City where she painted some of her most memorable portraits. Neel lived in Greenwich Village, Spanish Harlem, and the Upper West Side where she embraced the diversity of the neighborhoods' people. Establishing relationships was important to Neel so that she could portray each person's unique personality. Like Neel, my portraits are a catalogue of individuals that I know. Residing in the Washington, D.C. area since 1970 has given me the opportunity to create genuine

connections with local people. Similar to Neel, my work is a reflection of relationships that I have formed within the community. In my paintings, I look for the body language of my subjects that best reveals their character traits. I carefully select poses that accentuate their gazes and hand movements. It is, in part, Neel's influence that has helped me to highlight the emotional quality of my portraits.

Lastly, the artist Elizabeth Peyton is another source of inspiration. Throughout this artist's career, paintings of friends and musicians have played an integral role in her choice of subject matter. When asked about her paintings' subjects, Peyton said, "It's just who I am very interested in, and identify with, and see as very hopeful in the world" (Peyton, 1). Peyton's work is unique because she chooses to tell us about her own individuality by painting the people she most admires. She has built a virtual community of people around her through the careful selection of particular individuals. Like Peyton, I draw on this same device of painting people that I am most influenced by and connected with. I mirror her focused attention on the individual to reveal the person's character and mood. Through painting people that have had direct influences on my life helps me reveal my own identity.

Warhol, Neel, and Peyton focused on situations that were driven and reinforced by their own experiences. These artists inspired me to choose a subject matter that was personal, a painting process that was based in photography, and colors that emphasize emotional content.

In addition to these artists, Ancient Egypt has always fascinated me. I recall seeing Steven Spielberg's (b. 1946) *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) movie, which yielded mysterious scenes of decoding hieroglyphics. In regards to my jewelry work, I am influenced by the Ancient Egyptian symbol of the heart. Through researching the origination of the heart image, it is difficult to pinpoint the earliest source. One possibility is that the stylized heart comes from

Ancient Egypt as reflected in the shape of a handled vase called an *ieb*. It is thought that the *ieb*, and its hieroglyphic symbol, represented life and morality. For example, The Ancient Egyptians described a ceremony that took place in the afterlife based on the heart's weight. If your heart was lighter than a feather, you would join the god Osiris in the Fields of Peace. If you did something bad, and your heart was heavy, you would be devoured by the demon Ammit, a heart-eating monster with the head of a crocodile. This investigation of the heart has guided me to an understanding of how symbols are a form of communication and contain elements of history. In my work, I use the heart as a shared expression of love and a universal symbol for human passion and emotion.

My interest in the heart shape has led me to also explore the significance of the heart in contemporary art. I explored the works of Jim Dine (b. 1935), Keith Haring (1958-1990), and Robert Williams (b. 1943) for ideas and inspiration. These artists used the heart in their work to help us question our own feelings. For example, Jim Dine used the heart to represent the love of his wife. Keith Haring used the heart as a symbol to unite people for world peace. Robert Williams used hearts as an emotional device to show human desire and love. By representing the heart symbol in my work I aspire to present others with the opportunity to reflect on their own personal feelings.

Finally, the ambiguity and mystery surrounding the work of African-American artist, James Hampton (1909-1964), is another source of inspiration. I was entranced when I saw *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* (1950-1964) at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. In this installation, Hampton covered 180 objects with shimmering metallic foil as a tribute to his religious faith. Hampton built a chapel out of discarded items from a federal office building where he had worked as a janitor.

He also included his own hieroglyphic-like writing system, thought to be based on an ancient African language, to identify aspects of the piece. The surface texture of metal and his use of symbolism appealed to me. I wanted to invest my own metal jewelry pieces with similar feelings of awe and splendor from the viewer.

It is through the study of these artists that I have explored the appearance and more importantly, emotive component in my work. It is through these influences that I have developed artwork based upon my personal experiences and relationships.

On Canvas

I remember reading and being affected by Nancy Spungen's (1958-1978) biography *And I Don't Want to Live This Life* (1983). Spungen was the girlfriend of Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious (1957-1979). The Sex Pistols were an English punk rock band, often embroiled in controversy that formed in London in 1975. This book ignited my curiosity and fascination with individuals whose dramatic lives were encompassed by music. So, I searched for places that would surround me with individuals devoted to the music culture. I went to WUST Hall, a music venue in Washington, D.C, to listen to music and speak with the local youth about current political and social issues. This event led to my involvement in the Washington, D.C. music scene. At this point, I began discovering and photographing the lives of those individuals connected with this way of life. I used these images as the foundation for my paintings. My goal focused on creating high contrast portraits that were inspired by the dramatic and colorful imagery of the Pop art movement.

Digital photography became a vital tool in my creative process. I experimented with wide angle lenses and large aperture settings to achieve high contrast photographs, in mostly low light

situations. These photographs were adjusted in a computer program until reduced to mainly two values of black and white. Parts of the image were often abstracted as the photo was adjusted. I used a large format printer to print these images. Then, I transferred them to canvas by tracing the shapes. Carbon paper gave me the best results because it was relatively quick and easy to use, and more importantly left an outline that assisted me in defining the figure in a precise manner. It was my objective to paint hard-edged, stylized portraits.

In my work *HR* (Appendix, 1), I depict a local innovative singer billed for being ahead of his time. His vocal virtuosity continues unchallenged today. The intensity he displays in his performances is often compared to the renowned soul singer James Brown (1933-2006). He is known as a pioneer for crossing the genres of punk and reggae while bringing manic energy to the stage. I presented *HR* in a triad of secondary colors of orange, violet, and green. Orange was used for the figure to capture his lively persona. The purple and green were used to define the ground and contours of the figure. I positioned him with a gestural tilt of his head and crossed arms to indicate his playful personality. In this piece, I wanted to draw attention to a local and widely influential musical icon.

Initially, in my portraits I used solid colored grounds. However, in *Stuart* (Appendix, 2) I included musical equipment and intricate designs in the background. I wanted these background elements to help in the balance of positive and negative space and to infer a sense of movement. In choosing colors for this painting, I decided to use a primary color scheme of red, blue, and yellow. I used red for the figure which helped to emphasize the lively guitar playing and energy. The blue and yellow were used as a contrast to the figure.

My next work focused more on pure emotion. *Grant* (Appendix, 3) shows a lively drummer leading the band with rhythmic beats. The composition is filled with the warm colors

that include yellow, orange, red, and red-violet. Contrasting these analogous colors in this work allowed me to express the figures intense personality and raw energy.

In *Pablo* (Appendix, 4), I took a different approach to color and developed a monochromatic format. In this scheme I used violet and its range of tints and shades. I was interested in using one color and its values for a unifying and harmonious effect. I chose a violet hue because of its association with quiet meditation. Violet helped emphasize the figure's calm manner. I wanted the overall composition to evoke a soothing feeling.

At this point, I wanted to explore other compositional arrangements. I decided to use variation within my work by showing close-up views of my figures. *David* (Appendix, 5) provides a close-up view of a singer's face and a microphone. The shapes became more abstracted when they were enlarged and the contours became more complex. In *David's Eye* (Appendix, 6), I used an even more extreme close-up view which showed a cropped image of an eye. The magnification of the image creates an abstraction that is reduced to its most basic shapes. This abstraction references music through its rhythmic contour lines.

As I progressed through this series of portraits, I came to realize that it was important for my work on canvas to enrich the viewer's experience. My ability to approach my subjects with respect has afforded me access to musical subcultures. By painting these individuals, I wanted to honor the music, ideas, and energy that transformed me into who I am today. I am a person enriched by music and involved in the music scene as a documenter. I wanted my portraits to capture the powerful energy found in music. It was also important for me to document Washington, D.C. music history. Through my paintings, I wanted others to examine the movement of people who expressed their views through music. My paintings offer others an opportunity to catch a rare glimpse of Washington, D.C.'s rich music history up close and very

personal.

In Metal

It is thought that jewelry began as a functional item that fastened clothing together. Over time it was adapted for use as religious symbols and then developed as an object of decoration. I believe that jewelry is one of the most personal statements I can make in my apparel. It has to fit me physically but also should reveal something I care about. In my jewelry, I developed pieces that reflected my interest in handmade woven patterns, such as chain maille, and my fascination with the heart symbol.

Chain maille is an ancient tradition of weaving metal rings together to form a chain. It was used in the earliest form of metal armor. The name comes from the French word *maille* which is derived from the Latin word "macula" which translates as *mesh of a net*. The armor involved the linking of iron or steel rings and the ends were pressed together, welded, or riveted.

Chain maille is now used to create fine jewelry pieces. I chose to work with it because I wanted to replicate the unique patterns that machines could not produce. In making my pieces, I selected a silver color metal because of its simplicity of appearance. I also chose a medium-sized 18g (gauge) wire because of its substantial weight and strength. I considered facets of weight and size so that the jewelry is comfortable and moves with the body.

When working with chain maille construction, it was necessary for me to keep in mind the aspect ratio of *jump rings*. Jump rings are the small circles of wire used in making jewelry. The aspect ratio determined how the inner and outer diameter of wire related to the jump ring, so all parts accurately fit together. After I established the correct aspect ratio through experimentation and research, I tightly wrapped the wire onto *mandrels*. Mandrels are tools used

for jewelry shaping, forming, and sizing. After I wrapped the wire, I sawed through the wound coils to achieve individual round rings. I filed away any rough edges or burs. Then, I polished the rings and I started weaving them together, which was essentially joining links. I opened and closed each jump ring with patience and attention to detail. I held the jump rings with pliers to prevent warping or twisting, so that the jump ring remained perfectly round. I took care to prevent scratching or gouges in the metals.

In *Helm Chain Maille Necklace* (Appendix, 7) I used flat and chain nose pliers to create the helm pattern. I was interested in this pattern because it is known as an *orbital weave*. An orbital weave refers to some of the rings that do not actually thread through other rings but instead are trapped between them. These floating rings added interest to the piece. I chose to use this same pattern for the matching *Helm Chain Maille Bracelet* (Appendix, 8). It was important for me to establish unity in this necklace and bracelet set.

Once I finished the weave, I used round nose pliers to make spiral clasps for both the helm necklace and bracelet. The spirals replicated the same round shapes found in the weave. I chose to create my own clasps instead of purchasing pre-made supplies. It was important to me to be involved with every phase of the metal work.

In *Original Chain Maille Necklace* (Appendix, 9) I took a different approach. In this design I created an original weave. I challenged myself by developing my own unique pattern. I used 20g wire which was lighter than what I had previously used. The overall composition resulted in a more delicate necklace. This weave reflected my desire and passion for innovation.

In addition to using wire, I worked with precious metal clay (PMC). I found that metal clay was easy to work with and imitated the look of traditional metals. In my PMC work, I used slab forming techniques and rolled out the clay in even thickness. This helped to assure a

consistent, strong surface that was less prone to warping and tearing. In addition, I also used *cork clay* as a mold so that my pieces were hollow after firing. Cork clay is a very pliable material made from ground wood. When a piece is fired the cork burns out and the pieces become lightweight. I prefer to work with cork clay so the results are strong, thin, and comfortable to wear.

The framework for my PMC designs was centered on the heart shape. Through using the heart I further investigated my experiences of love. My professional career as a teacher has given me a platform of showing my love for those people around me. In *Key to My Heart Pendant* (Appendix, 10), I formed a heart shape out of cork clay. Then, I rolled, shaped, and draped PMC over the dried cork. In the heart shape, I constructed a small key hole and antique-styled key for added interest. This piece signifies the love I have for my students, our love for each other in the community, and love in the world around us.

I took a different approach in *Open My Heart Locket* (Appendix, 11). I set a heart-shaped gemstone inside a piece of cork clay. I also impressed textures into the heart by manipulating the clay surface with rubber stamps. I created a swing hinge so the piece could open and shut to reveal the red heart-shaped stone. The heart-shaped gemstone represents feelings of compassion. The deep red color represents the enthusiasm one feels to keep giving. This piece represents me as a young girl, always wanting to love the world. I am reminded of bringing hope to dismal situations, and thinking of ways to help others.

In *Heavy Heart Pendant* (Appendix, 12), I wanted to build up the form by adding a raised area so that part of the piece would appear in high relief. I rolled out a clay coil and pressed it into a pattern block to achieve a cable texture. I used clay slip to join the rope detail to the edges of the heart. I wanted to enhance my work by adding the sculptural elegance of cable wrap. It

was important for me to develop details in my work that were eye-catching and unique. The criss-cross cable pattern represented my own pathway through life as I developed my own dreams and goals.

Through creating my jewelry, I found it was important for me to examine my true identity, which was the driving force behind my work. Incorporating the heart into my designs allowed me to draw attention to my real life experiences. I also wanted to honor the ancient heart symbol and recognize how symbols are a form of communication. By introducing my heart jewelry I wanted others to examine the many facets that make us human.

Overall, my work is based on what I see, hear, and most importantly what I feel. It is how my heart and soul connect to the people and environment that surrounds me. The similarities between my paintings and jewelry are that my work is unified by the people I meet, share with, and love.

Conclusion

The Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Program has had an enormous role in facilitating my own philosophy of art and developing my artistic style. The wide range of experiences in the program has encouraged me to examine what it is I bring to the art world that is unique, and expresses my ideas with certainty. The development of my portfolio has given me confidence to define who I am, while allowing me to establish a defined body of work. By practicing my art and meeting creative goals, I learned to not only discover myself but to encourage my students to search for themselves through art making.

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Appendix

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Figure 1. *HR*, acrylic on canvas, 20"x20", 2010.



Figure 2. *Stuart*, acrylic on canvas, 20"x20", 2011.



Figure 3. *Grant*, acrylic on canvas, 20"x20", 2011.



Figure 4. *Pablo*, acrylic on canvas, 20"x20", 2011.



Figure 5. *David*, acrylic on canvas, 20"x20", 2011.



Figure 6. *David's Eye*, acrylic on canvas, 10" x 10" x 1.5", 2011.



Figure 7. *Helm Chain Maille Necklace*, sterling silver 18g wire, 18" x .5" x .1" 2009.



Figure 8. *Helm Chain Maille Bracelet*, sterling silver 18g wire, 7" x .5" x .1", 2009.



Figure 9. *Original Chain Maille Necklace*, sterling silver 20g wire, 16" x .5" x .1", 2010.



Figure 10. *Key to My Heart Pendant*, sterling silver precious metal clay, 1" x .7" x .5", 2010.



Figure 11. *Open My Heart Locket*, precious metal clay, .75" x .5" x .25", 2011.



Figure 12. *Heavy Heart Pendant*, sterling silver precious metal clay, 1.25" x 1" x .5", 2011.

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Education:

- 2012 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- 1992 Bachelor of Science in Art Education, Radford University, Radford, VA

Teaching Licensure:

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- 2007-2008 Art Teacher, Carlin Springs Elementary School, Drew Model Elementary School, and Tuckahoe Elementary School, Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, VA
- 1998-2007 Art Teacher, Kindergarten – Eighth Grade, Browne Academy, Alexandria, VA

Selected Related Experience:

- 2011-Present Humanities Coordinator, Nottingham Elementary School, Arlington, VA
- 2010-2011 Museum-School Partnership Facilitator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC, and Nottingham Elementary School, Arlington, VA
- 2010 Presenter, *Art and Students with Special Needs*, Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, VA
- 2009 Awarded Certificate of Completion for Gifted Students' Creative and Critical Thinking Coursework, Jamestown Elementary, Arlington, VA
- 2008 Awarded Certificate of Completion for Web Design Coursework for Art Teachers, Arlington Public School, Arlington, VA
- 2008 Museum-School Partnership Facilitator, Textile Museum, Washington, DC, and Drew Elementary School, Arlington, VA
- 2007 Awarded Certificate of Completion for Arts Integration Coursework, Arlington Public Schools, Arlington, VA

Selected Related Experience (Continued):

- 2002 Presenter, *Paper Forms*, Virginia Art Education Association, Roanoke, VA
- 2001 Presenter, *Carousel Animals*, Virginia Art Education Association, Manassas, VA
- 1996 Judge, *National Art Contest*, Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC

Professional Memberships:

- 2010-Present Global Art Project for Peace, Tucson, AZ
- 2009-Present Dream Flag Project, Agnes Irwin School, Rosemont, PA
- 1992-Present National Art Education Association, Northern Virginia Division, Reston, VA

Selected Grants, Honors, and Awards:

- 2012 Tag Label Finalist, *Tag Label Writing Contest*, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
- 2010 Student Artwork Cover, *March is Arts in the Schools Month*, Arlington, VA
- 2009 Visiting Artist Grant, Nottingham Elementary Parent Teacher Association, Arlington, VA
- 2008 Student Artwork Cover, *Arlington Connection Newspaper*, Arlington, VA
- 2007 Blue Grant, Arlington Community Foundation, Arlington, VA
- 1992 Honorable Mention Award, *Radford University Art Exhibition*, Gallery 205, Radford University, Radford, VA
- 1990-1992 Dean's List, Radford University, Radford, VA

Exhibitions:

- 2012 *Portraits in Reverb*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at Verizon Gallery, Annandale, VA
- 2007 *Arlington County Public Schools Artist/Teacher Exhibition*, Education Center, First Floor Gallery, Arlington, VA
- 1992 *Radford University Art Exhibition*, Gallery 205, Radford, VA